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ABSTRACT

Needs of off-campus students in Southern West Virginia, and specifically students enrolled at Bluefield State College, are considered. The computer college has several off-campus locations, including one 60 miles away, and it serves a population that tends to have low educational attainment levels. One environmental factor that influences student attitudes is the classroom site, which in the rural setting may be located in a poorly maintained public building or store. Organizational factors, such as size of the off-campus center, student services, and course offerings, also influence student perceptions and self-images. Student characteristics need to be assessed in understanding student perceptions. In the Bluefield State service area, off-campus students show a high degree of economic need and American College Test scores significantly below the state average, which is in turn lower than the national norm. It is suggested that in addition to needing access to counselors, students must have adequate opportunities to provide feedback to administrators. Steps taken at McDowell County to improve the off-campus situation are noted, including establishing a permanent secretarial position, using a newly established full-time faculty position in a liaison capacity, and implementing an individualized instructional center. (SW)

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Off-Campus Students, Our Second-Class Citizens: Improving Self-Images

It is generally recognized if not always openly admitted that off-campus students are in many senses second-class citizens who, despite what we would like to think, simply do not receive anywhere near the same level of services as their on-campus counterparts. The fact that conferences on off-campus programs are held, that a quality issue exists, is an indication of the scope and recognition level of the problem. Fortunately concerted efforts are now being made to improve off-campus programming, with such critical matters as faculty credentials and overall quality of instruction receiving detailed attention. While instructional quality is of course paramount, there are a number of secondary matters which, if not properly addressed, result in poor self-images of off-campus students and correspondingly tarnished views of the sponsoring institution. Unfortunately, because many are in themselves not of major significance, they are often given too little attention and allowed to continue unsolved, resulting in a generally negative attitude on the part of students involved.

In discussing this subject, it is important to establish parameters and relevance of experiences. Hollenhauer and others have identified significant variances in terminology with regard to off-campus instruction which frequently result in misunderstanding.[1] To clarify the approach taken here, it should be noted that many of the observations made are based upon experience of public institutions in southern West Virginia in offering off-campus credit programs, with the specific focus of reference being Bluefield State College in Bluefield, West Virginia.

Bluefield State College is state-supported four-year college serving six southern West Virginia counties as well as significiant numbers of residents from nearby Virginia. The college, with an enrollment of 2700 students, offers six

bachelor's degrees with over 60 specializations and a score of associate degrees. A non-residential insitution, Bluefield State embraces a philosophy of open admissions and expanded educational opportunity. Many of the college's greatest challenges come from serving a population with an educational attainment level which is considerably below the national average by most measurable standards.

Like many institutions, Bluefield State College has for some time provided instruction in off-campus settings to make its programs accessible to a wider public. The college operates a full-fledged community college center in Lewisburg, some 60 miles to the northeast; complete programs in three specific career areas in Beckley, 40 miles to the north; and a large number of course offerings in Welch, 35 miles to the west. It also offers courses within the confines of the Federal Correctional Institution for Women at Alderson and in other communities of varying distance from the main campus. It should perhaps be noted that the rugged, hilly terrain of this area makes distances deceptive; driving times are much greater than might initially appear, especially during winter months.

Despite the unique characteristics of a given geographical area or a particular institution, however, many of the challenges encounted in off-campus instructional offerings are inherent to off-campus programming in general and of relevance to practitioners in various settings. The problem of poor student self-images is one such common problem and environmental factors are often of key concern. In exploring this subject, Moos has identified four kinds of environmental influences on student attitudes: physical setting, organizational factors, the human aggregate and social climate.[2] An examination of each can reveal a number of areas which are frequently given too little attention by administrators of off-campus programs.

The physical setting itself is on prime importance. In many cases this can be assumed to be a given factor and must be dealt with accordingly. In others the assessment of setting may be approached with some degree of flexibility. For purposes of discussion here physical setting will refer to office and classroom

sites rather than the more general choice of areas. At Bluefield State College, for example, the case of McDowell County offerings is typical and will be discussed later.

Various studies cited by Moos show that architecture and physical design can have definite influence on student attitudes.[3] Just as classroom seating arrangements affect student openness, architectural considerations influence the impressions students have not only of the host institutions but indirectly of themselves. In southern West Virginia, for example, off-campus classes have been offered in settings such as the unfinished portion of a new high school, classrooms in older high schools, refurbished store buildings and community centers. In other regions of the country similar arrangements are common, although facilities are perhaps more uniformly modern. However even where that is the case a certain lack of collegiality tends to exist, and it is here that self-images suffer.

The matter of isolation must also be considered. By their very nature off-campus students are isolated from the main campus and all its services, and this problem is relevant whether the distance involved is 50 miles or 500 miles. In terms of self-assessment it is generally acknowledged that psychological stress is a frequent result of removing an individual from the mainstream. This may be less of a problem in urban areas where other various environmental influences can reenforce educational experiences. In rural areas, however, the student is often truly isolated from such reenforcement. In Appalachia, for example, many students are the only individuals in their family pursuing higher education, and a large percentage work twenty or more hours per week in coal mining or similar industries. Once they leave the classroom, these students are truly removed not only from the academic maintream--if indeed they had been there in the first place--but from any kind of secondary reenforcement.

Similarly, many students are severely deprived in economic as well as cultural terms. In numerous cases they do not have the resources to pursue any other alternative, and have had to settle for those educational opportunities that are

immediately available even if they consider them second-best or worse. Lack of self-confidence in such cases is understandable, particularly when the physical setting is itself lacking in amenities. It is one thing to attend college classes in a recently built high school; it is another to find oneself a student in a poorly maintained, partially remodeled general store or an aging, dingy public building. It is a fact that many students enrolled in off-campus courses in rural settings would consider a typical urban office or even a hotel conference room a luxurious setting indeed.

In cases where the facilities are more modern, undesirable identification factors of a different sort may enter into play. This is particularly true when high schools are used for day or evening classes. Many students feel reluctant to return to a high school setting where, by virtue of merely being there, they may feel they are being associated with the younger students. Too, many disadvantaged students have negative memories of high school experiences, and return to them with a substantial degree of misgiving.

Organizational factors also have serious implications, with the most obvious among these being size. The smaller the off-campus center or the efforts being made, the less positive reenforcement the student is likely to obtain. Hollenhauer's study of a group of institutions showed that while off-campus centers with 1,000 or more students tended to have an adequate to good staffing level, the typical center serving fewer than 500 students had very limited personnel resources, ranging from a secretary or instructor/liaison person to none at all.[4] In rural areas this can be especially detrimental to the student's self-image, where high schools are typically small and the student may have already developed a feeling of inferiority as compared to students from larger communities.

Other organizational factors such as curricular constraints and available student services and activities are directly related to size, with of course fewer alternatives in smaller centers. And it should not be forgotten that off-campus

courses are frequently offered in single locations which could not even be called a center; in these instances the only organization may be the class itself. At any rate, the students' perception of institutional commitment will be dependent upon the quality and consistency of services provided. Most professionals administering off-campus enterprises can relate instances where images of the institution--and the students themselves--have been affected negatively by these factors.

Consideration of the human aggregate is essential to obtain an understanding of student perceptions. While naturally such as socioeconomic background, ability level, educational attainment and educational goals will vary, they tend to be more uniform at off-campus locations than at the host institution. In the Bluefield State service area, off-campus students show a high degree of economic need and a lower ability level as measured by ACT scores (the average is significantly lower than the state average, which is in turn lower than the national norm). Previous educational attainment levels are low, and withdrawal rates once these students venture into the college classroom are high. Not surprisingly, their goals tend to be less ambitious. Degree expectations are low, and the majority would not choose an on-campus location even if it were more readily available. Hollenhauer found that students were by and large uninterested in future transfer to the main campus,[5] and a study by Larkin revealed that three out of four students in the area examined favored off-campus locations.[6] Taken together, these elements can be considered as futility factors in student development and self-assessment.

The resultant social climate perspective is based upon what Moos calls "an environmental 'press' obtained from an inferred continuity and consistency in otherwise discrete events."[7] One of the shortcomings of many off-campus operations is a lack of consistency in their routine and the lack of development of a favorable environmental press with which students can identify. Even more detrimental, perhaps, is the perception that students have little or no recourse to change

aspects of the educational environment. Recent studies cited by Moos have suggested that "feelings of helplessness and an inability to control environmental stimuli may be more important than the actual characteristics of the environment itself."[8]

Recognizing these various environmental influences on student attitudes, a flexible approach seems necessary if administrators of off-campus programs are to foster positive student self-images. First of all, persons in such positions must find ways to overcome what Daughtry and others refer to as the law of parsimony, that is, that one must do what is necessary to be effective, but no more.[9] The off-campus continuing educator must be prepared to exceed the minimum and willing to pursue innovative approaches more readily than perhaps most other higher education administrators.

In assessing student self-images, one important area which is often overlooked is that of counseling. Unfortunately, off-campus students sometimes are not provided an adequate opportunity for qualified, professional counseling. Instead they receive a mixture of academic advising, usually at the beginning of the semester or quarter, and registration assistance. But unless special measures are taken, students do not have an adequate level of this vital service.

In addition to access to counselors, students must have adequate opportunities to provide feedback to those in administrative positions. Written surveys, formal and informal meetings and the regular announced availability of administrators can provide useful vehicles for such communication. A related and potentially particularly effective measure is the assignment of high level administrators (up to and including the president of the institution, when possible) to teach off-campus courses.

In considering the kinds of measures which might be taken toward the improvement of student perceptions, the McDowell County example is perhaps typical. During the past three years the following steps have been taken in overall program development:

1) establishment of a permanent secretarial position

2) relocation of the facility from the existing vocational-technical center to a new consolidated high school
3) addressal of various facilities problems such as inadequate heating, lack of food services and shortcomings in furniture
4) establishment of a permanent full-time faculty position (English)
5) use of the full-time position in a liaison capacity, with gradual redefinement of duties
6) development and implementation of an individualized instructional center labelled SPICE (Self-Paced Instruction for Competency in English)
7) establishment of the position of evening and off-campus counselor
8) assignment of a weekly, three-credit evening course to the president of the institution
9) development of written surveys of student curricular needs
10) initiation of separate McDowell County student orientation sessions at the beginning of each semester with participation by key administrators from the main campus
11) expansion of the number and variety of course offerings
12) initiation of programmed cultural events.

While many of these steps can be seen as routine measures for off-campus program development, it is their very mundaneness, in many cases, which requires special attention. For if off-campus administrators deal with innovation to the exclusion of routine consideration of student perceptions, or if simple complacency sets in, then the self-images of students will suffer. And successful off-campus programming--if it truly is successful--must depend in great measure on the positive outlook of the students being served.

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NOTES

1. Emery Hollenhauer, "Observations on Off-Campus Credit Courses and Programs." ERIC, 1978, 4.

2. Rudolf H. Moos, Evaluating Educational Environments (San Franciso: Jossey-Bass, 1979), 6-7.

3. Ibid., p. 8.

4. Hollenhauer, p. 4.

5. Ibid., p. 7.

6. Paul G. Larkin, "Who Wants a Degree? Educational Goals and Related Preferences of Off-Campus Students at Five Extension and Degree Centers." ERIC, 1977, 3.

7. Moos, p. 11.

8. Ibid., p. 245.

9. Jody Daughtry, "A Flexible Approach to Off-Campus Instruction," Community and Junior College Journal, 48, March 1978, 38.